

# HOW AM I?

## A DISCUSSION ON SELF-CARE PRACTICES

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*'If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And, if not now, when?'*

Rabbi Hillel the Elder pondered this question 2000 years ago. It raises the question of how do we, as providers of care, care for ourselves as well as others.

Chiropractors in Australia work predominantly in private practice; however have involvement in other roles as a chiropractor including university teaching, research, clinical supervision, volunteer work, and professional organisation activities (Adams et al., 2017). Research has demonstrated that 16% of Australians consult a chiropractor annually (Charity, et al., 2016). The vast majority of patients seek chiropractic care due to musculoskeletal disorders (Brown, et al., 2014; Charity et al., 2016). Data indicates that most chiropractors in Australia see 87.7 patients per week. These figures indicate that chiropractors play an integral role in improving the pain and functioning of the public and, as such, contribute greatly to the health and well-being of the community.

As health care providers, whether it be for physical or mental health, best practice involves conducting a thorough assessment which will inform treatment approach and goals; consequently, our first question to our patients is typically something along the lines of ... *'How are you?'* Their answer informs us of how to proceed, what to ask next, how to best meet the needs of this patient, how to provide the best possible care to our patient. But how often do we stop and ask ... *'How am I?'* Why should we even ask ourselves this question? The question prompts us to examine ourselves and ascertain if we are taking care of ourselves. Self-care has been defined in different ways but essentially means looking after one's own health and well-being, both personally and professionally (Slonim, Kienhuis, Di Benedetto, & Reece, 2015).

### Should I ... ?

So now you know what self-care is and the different aspects of it, the question remains ... *'Why should I engage in self-care?'* Let's consider why self-care is important and what are some of the

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Quick tap or scan:



risk associated with not asking ourselves, how am I? A 2013 survey of the Australian adult population found that 75% of participants reported stress was having a negative impact on their physical health, 65% reported stress was impacting their mental health (Australian Psychological Society, 2013). Empirical research has demonstrated chiropractors are not immune to stress and are faced with unique causes of burnout (Williams, 2011). Williams found that potential stressors for chiropractors include the physical workload, mental and emotional demands and role stress. If these stressors are not appropriately managed there is an increased risk of burnout. Burnout is defined by Schaufeli & Greenglass (2001, p 501) as a *'state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion that results from long-term involvement in work situations that are emotionally demanding'* (Williams, 2011) Riley and colleagues (2018). conducted a qualitative examination of the sources of stress and distress for General Practitioners. They found they experienced a high likelihood of experiencing psychological distress (Riley, et al., 2018). Sources of stress included the emotional component of their work, isolation and lack of support, work and role demands including concerns regarding making errors, complaints and financial concerns.

### Detrimental stress

Unmanaged stress can have a detrimental impact on psychological distress and life satisfaction among Allied Health professionals (Harris, Cumming, & Campbell, 2006). The accumulation of these factors can result in a reduction in relationship building communicative practices with patients (Robbins, Butler, & Schoenthaler, 2019). The effects of stress on mental and physical health have been well documented including; cognitive impairment (Munzo, Sliwinski, Scott, & Hofer, 2015; van Dam, Keijsers, Eling, & Becker, 2011); emergence of depression (Van Praag, 2009); and increased risk of workplace suicide. (Sullivan & Germaine, 2019) Wise, Hersh, and Gibson (2012) suggest that self-care is an ethical imperative, raising the question of whether without engagement in sustainable self-care practices practitioners are meeting the requirement of competency to practice. Good practice involves *'maintaining health and wellbeing'* (Chiropractic Board of Australia, 2014). Research has identified a number of barriers to health care providers engaging in self-care practices including burnout, professional isolation, and stigma (Australian Psychological Society, 2017).

Self-care is a highly individualised concept, determined by our values, interests, goals and personality. Therefore, our self-care strategies need to reflect this and to be relevant to the individual, as well as sustainable, and values driven. There are a number of key aspects to self-care, including professional well-being, which involves quality supervision, peer consultation and meaningful engagement in Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Psychological well-being also forms an integral role in self-care practices with strategies including self monitoring, reflective practice, monitoring maladaptive and unhelpful thinking patterns, and engaging in psychological therapy. Spiritual well-being is also an important component of self-care, as it typically influences an individual's core beliefs about life's meaning and purpose. Spiritual self-care strategies involve practices such as meditation, mindfulness, prayer, and involvement with the relevant spiritually based community. Finally, an individual's lifestyle also supports self-care strategies, which includes regular exercise, healthy diet, good sleep, participation in hobbies, and maintenance of healthy relationships.

A number of self-care models to assist health practitioners to establish effective and sustainable self-care practices have been developed. Whilst there is a deficit in the literature in regards to self-care models specific to the field of chiropractic, there have been numerous models developed for psychologists and self-care. Given the significant interrelationship between psychological and physical well-being in terms of patient care, meeting patient expectations, fulfilling Continuing Professional Development requirements, running a business, and manage daily stressors it is appropriate to use this model when considering self-care practices for chiropractors.

## Four principles of self-care

Wise, Hersh and Gibson (2012) examined ways in which self-care can be applied in everyday life. They suggest that there are four foundational principles associated with promoting well-being and self-care. Flourishing not surviving; this mindset essentially facilitates a broad range of possibilities both personally and professionally, emphasising positive attitudes, behaviours and resilience.

Intentionality involves choosing a self-care plan and adopting a willingness to change unhelpful attitudes and behaviours. Wise et al., encourage reciprocity, *'the process of dynamic exchange of beneficial lifestyle, attitudes and practice between psychologist and client'* (p 488).

They promote mindfulness based positive principles and practices (MPPPs). Mindfulness involves living in the moment, intentionally paying attention and fully engaging in the moment you are in, and facilitating a curious attitude, acceptance and friendliness to whatever is happening, and abandoning unhealthy patterns of judgment and criticism (Kostanski & Hassed, 2008). Engagement in mindfulness and self care practices has been shown to decrease distress and enhance well-being in a group of medical students (Slonim, Kienhuis, Di Benedetto, & Reece, 2015; Warnecke, Ogden, Bentley & Nelson, 2017).

Finally, Wise and colleagues suggest the principle of integration into daily practice, rather than added. They suggest that integration of self-care practices in daily lifestyle increases the sustainability of such practices, as opposed to the difficulties and obstacles associated with developing new routines.

Walsh (2011) developed the Therapeutic Lifestyle Changes (TLC) model. According to the TLC model there are eight self-care strategies crucial to a person's wellbeing: exercise to improve physical health and cognitive functioning; nutrition and diet for physical and mental wellbeing; spending time in nature enhances cognitive functioning and emotional wellbeing; relationships that are meaningful improve quality of life, happiness, and improve resilience; recreational and enjoyable activities include participating in hobbies and interest which increases mood and reduces stress; relaxation and stress management; involvement in religious and spiritual practices which revolve around love and forgiveness improve psychological health and support the maintenance of quality relationships; contribution and service include acts of altruism, such as volunteering, donating money or goods and supporting others. According to Walsh (2011) engaging in altruistic acts improves mood, self esteem and life satisfaction.

## An individualised care plan

Now that we have defined self-care, explored the importance of it, and reviewed two models of self-care, we need to consider ways to create an individualised care plan. The *Self-Care Assessment Worksheet* (Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996) is a self-assessment tool developed to explore a person's efficacy in self-care practices. It invites the reader to assess self-care on the following domains; physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, professional and balance. This tool can be easily found online. Conducting such an assessment allows you to develop a baseline, through consistently re-evaluating you are able to determine areas where self-care may be inadequate, and therefore may need extra attention. Some of us prefer a more fluid and less formal way of assessing our self-care practices. How can you set aside some time on a weekly basis to check in with yourself? Asking the question ... *'How am I?'* What type of prompts will you need? Some suggestions include reflection time scheduled in your diary, being open to regular feedback from a colleague or partner, or regular clinical/peer supervision?

## Conclusion

In concluding, this paper has defined self-care, highlighted why it's important, explored some relevant models of self-care and suggested ways to assess self-care practices. In effect we have looked at the what, why, and how of self-care.

It is now up to you to specifically prioritise your own self-care, and, most importantly, when you will start and how you will assess.

Finally, as health care providers we have a responsibility to take care of ourselves in the same way we do our patients. I quote a former supervisor '*Never ask a patient to do what you are not doing yourself.*'

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